

EU Health Programme: working together to improve public health in Europe –

A selection of Public Health Projects with an important impact for EU Member States



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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Further information on the projects can be found on the Health Programme Projects database at:

EAHC website <http://ec.europa.eu/eahc/projects/database.html>,
on the DG SANCO Health Portal EU <http://health.europe.eu> and on
SANCO Web Site <http://ec.europa.eu/health/>

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Network for communicable disease control in southern Europe and Mediterranean countries (EPISOUTH)

Many European Member States in the same geographic region can encounter the same health challenges. Similar environments and eco-systems in geographic regions can develop infectious diseases that pose questions for all Member States of this territorial area. If countries come together to work towards establishing a network of surveillance for infectious diseases and if they decide to work together with their neighbours, it can lead to remarkable benefits, as was the case with the EpiSouth and EpiSouth plus projects.

Infectious diseases as well as potential health threats do not have geographical boundaries. Even for the few diseases that benefit from an efficacious and available vaccines, surveillance is an indispensable and available instrument that public health professionals can use to contain their spread. However, in order to translate data into appropriate action, dissemination of information is crucial. Furthermore, an early detection of cases and a cross-border and prompt response is needed to effectively contain them.

In one region of the EU these facts were astutely recognised and in the Year of the Mediterranean in 2005, a number of countries agreed to develop the EpiSouth project whose aim was to create a framework of collaboration on epidemiological issues in order to improve communicable diseases surveillance, communication and training across the countries of the Mediterranean basin and the Balkans. Led by the Istituto Superiore di Sanita in Italy along with organisations from seven other EU countries in these regions, including the Institut de Veille Sanitaire (InVS) in France, **the EpiSouth project has fully delivered on its objectives and has created a strong system**

of networking and surveillance in a crucial first line of defense towards communicable diseases.

Training in the field of epidemiology, with the aim of strengthening the early response capability of participating countries to health threats and infectious disease has been put in place by EpiSouth. Additionally, the EpiSouth project has created a network of public health institutions that strengthens expertise among countries and a common platform on epidemic intelligence has been developed where participating countries may find broad internationally as well as regionally focused information.

Indeed it was France through the InVS, which conceived this platform on epidemic intelligence that allows for alerts on infectious diseases both outside and inside the EpiSouth participating countries to be sent to a secure website, thereby notifying these countries of any potential threats to their citizens. The platform also fully aligns with EU legislation on communicable diseases and the new International Health Regulations (IHR2005) as the messages are systematically sent to international organisations, such as the World Health Organisation and its regional offices (EURO and EMRO offices), and the European Centre for Disease Control. The EpiSouth Plus project aims at establishing connections between the EpiSouth and the Early Warning and Response System (EWRS) focal points. Dr Marc Gastellu Etchegorry, the Directeur du Département International at the InVS stated that the creation of this platform has already been of benefit to country members of the network including France. In 2010, a wide amplitude outbreak of West Nile virus occurred in several countries all around the Mediterranean



basin and through the Episouth platform on the website and the bulletin alerts **we were able to get immediate reports of this disease and epidemiological information which allowed us to respond and ensure that citizens were protected.'**

Over time the Episouth project grew to include 27 Countries (9 EU and 18 non-EU) and is the biggest inter country collaboration in the Mediterranean, having support from the Health programme (SANCO), the Instrument of Stability (DEVCO), European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), the World Health Organisation, and the Italian Ministry of Health. This occurrence provides a deeper picture on surveillance systems of countries towards infectious diseases and thereby allows for countries involved in the network a more informed response when a possible threat occurs. Because France has a lot of links with Mediterranean countries, the Episouth project is highly important for InVS as it gives a full and informed picture when outbreaks of diseases arise in the Mediterranean and in the areas around our borders plus it develops for us an immensely beneficial network of key organisations in the same field around our borders' stated Dr Françoise Weber, the Director of the InVS.

The Episouth Plus project that began in 2010 continues the extensive work of the Episouth project. Episouth Plus will build on the knowledge discovered in the previous phase of regional gaps in the field of Epidemic Intelligence, Vaccine Preventable Disease and Migrants, and Cross Border emerging Zoonoses and will seek to strengthen the work in these areas. One key focus of Episouth Plus is the establishment of a Mediterranean Regional Laboratories Network to facilitate common threats detection, and its capacity; to respond by supporting the generic preparedness planning, and the assessment of the Mediterranean countries' core capacities requirement to implement the International Health Regulation (2005). Dr Gastellu from the InVS is highly confident of the future benefits of this project *'just imagine if you have a new outbreak of the West Nile virus in a Maghreb country, if we work together and if we exchange information regarding these new pathogens our ability to protect all citizens both in the EU, and in this entire geographic region is sharply improved.'*

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<http://www.episouth.org/>

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The project "Network for communicable disease control in southern Europe and Mediterranean countries (EPISOUTH)" has been selected as the example of case study for France because the National Health authorities have used the project outputs on the development of National policies and Health programmes.

